



Aquamarine by **jukeboxpills**

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Summary: It's Will's 15th birthday and everyone's coming over to celebrate! Mike is sentimental and gets Will a special birthday present.

Aquamarine

Mike hadn't seen Will Byers all day. It was March 22nd, 1986, and Joyce had insisted both Byers boys go out to celebrate Will's 15th birthday. Mike didn't know what they could possibly be doing on a rainy, dreary day like today, but his best bet would probably be the arcade or book store.

A fairly new bookstore in Hawkins had pretty much everything Will was into. Apart from your normal books it had comics, magazines, some art supplies, and even a couple movies on VHS. So yeah, almost everything Will liked.

The rest of the Party had all spent the Saturday at the Wheeler residence, in the basement, with the accompaniment of Steve and Nancy. They were planning the biggest and best surprise birthday party to ever grace the face of this good Earth.

All day Mike had been tempted to pick up his REALISTIC radio and talk to Will (it's not like Will would even pick up since he was out all day anyway), but he would get distracted by one of his friends just as his eyes wandered over to the black, brick-sized piece of technology.

"Mike! Earth to Mike!" Dustin said into the boy's ear, all the while poking him on the face. Mike swatted Dustin's hand away and scowled at him. "Are you listening? You were the one who wanted to throw a surprise party anyway!"

"What, don't *you* want Will to have a birthday party?" Lucas retorted from across the little table. Today the table was strewn with streamers and balloons instead of Dungeons and Dragons miniatures.

"No, of course I do!" Dustin shook his head. "I just don't get why we need to make it a surprise. Can't we just tell him and he can help us set it up?"

"He can't set up his own birthday party, are you crazy?" Mike said, looking over to Lucas for support. "Even if it weren't a surprise that's like a law."

"Right," Lucas agreed, voice soaked in sarcasm, "if you don't want to help you don't need to. Then you also won't have to trouble yourself with attending the party, if it's too much of a burden."

Dustin threw his hands up dramatically. "That's not what I'm saying, and you know it."

"Oh it's not?" Lucas feigned offense. "Then tell me, oh great king of Dust, what *are* you saying?"

Dustin couldn't help but chuckle at that nickname, which got Lucas smiling, too, and suddenly they were both laughing like hyenas for no reason that anyone else in the room could understand.

Mike turned his attention away from his jocose friends to glance at the two girls sitting on the couch. Recently, Max had been teaching El how to braid. The redhead had used Mike as an example plenty of times when he was the one with the longest hair around at whatever time sparked her fancy. And, as with everything Max says, El took to it like a fly to sticky paper. She practiced anytime she could on whoever she could. Apart from Mike she used Nancy, Joyce, Steve, and Will. Sometimes she would even put tiny braids into Hopper's beard. Now, instead of party planning, El was trying to do many thin braids in Max's hair. Eleven thought it would look good when she came up with the idea, but now Max looked like she'd been electrocuted with the little braids sticking up everywhere.

Mike chuckled a bit to himself at the sight of Max sitting quietly while the other girl tugged and pulled at her hair. It was a wonder how nicely the two of them got along. They had hated each other at first, but once the situation El had witnessed in the gym was explained, the girls were able to laugh about it. That was two years ago, and now they were closer than ever.

"I'm going to go check on how the cake's doing," Mike said to no one in particular. No one responded, of course. They were all too busy doing their own things.

The young Wheeler bounded up the stairs two at a time (not in any particular hurry, just because he could). He could smell the cake before he stepped foot into the kitchen. Steve was leaning against the

counter while Nancy carefully shifted one their of the cake out of the circular pan and onto a drying rack.

"She's pretty, you know." Nancy was talking to Steve while trying not to drop the cake. "And nice."

"Who is?" Mike asked, curiosity suddenly peaked.

"No one," Steve said, and at the same time Nancy said, "Ally."

"Oh yeah, she is pretty," Mike agreed, remembering the times Nancy's friend had come over to the Wheeler house.

"See, even Mike thinks so," Nancy nodded, moving to pick up the other cake pan, then quickly dropping it. "Shit!"

"Too hot?" Steve stepped off the counter to where Nancy stood, a concerned look on his face.

"I'm fine," Nancy said as she turned on the sink to run her fingers under cold water.

"Let me see, Nance."

"I said I'm fine!" Nancy turned off the spigot and went back to the cake.

"Hey, try using oven mitts this time," Mike said with a grin.

"Wow, thanks Mike." His sister glared at him. She slid on the oven mitts and went back to switching the cake from the pan to the rack. "Anyway, what I was saying is that Steve hasn't managed to find anyone he's interested in at college. And Ally's home for spring break, too. Plus, I talked to her the other day and she mentioned she's looking for someone."

"Steve, sounds like it's your time to take a shot," Mike grinned at Steve and winked.

"Is your face okay, Wheeler?" Steve deadpanned. "You seem to be having convulsions in your eye."

Mike scoffed at him while Nancy shot a don't-be-stupid look at both of them.

"It's not like you can talk, anyway," Steve continued. "You don't have a girlfriend anymore. What happened with that? She couldn't stand the smell of your feet?"

"Very funny," Mike remarked. "I only came up here to check on the cake. Not to be criticized."

"Well the cake is coming along nicely, no thanks to mullet man over there." Nancy grinned at her own joke, trying to hide her smile from Steve.

"Hey, it's hot and you know it." Steve ran a hand self consciously through his hair. "And I did help! I mixed the batter."

They both ignored Steve's comment. Mike watched his sister set a mini fan in front of the two cake layers before sliding down the counter to where a stand mixer was waiting next to a bag of confectioner sugar.

"Don't forget to add a bit of green food dye to the icing," Mike reminded her. "But not too much. Just enough to give it a bit of color."

"I know, Mike, calm down," Nancy said, raising her eyebrows at her younger sibling. "You act as if any imperfection with the party will kill you."

"I just want Will to have a good time." Mike threw his hands up like he was surrendering, then turned and made his way away from his sister and the cake and towards the little open office that his mother was currently sitting at.

Karen was talking on the phone with a glass of white wine on the table in front of her. She was laughing at something someone on the other end said as Mike walked in. She looked up at him and told whoever it was to wait a moment, before lowering the phone.

"Hi sweetie," Karen Wheeler cooed, putting her hand over the receiver. "Is everything going alright? Do you need anything?"

"Actually, yeah I do need something." Mike admitted, face and ears turning red with heat. "I wanna get something for Will, but I don't have enough money."

"What about your allowance?" Karen put the phone on the table and turned her body to him as if physically turning her attention to him. "What happened with that? You should still have money, I paid for all the party supplies."

"I know," Mike said quickly, "I do have money left. Just not enough."

"Michael, what could you possibly want to get that you can't get with your allowance money?"

"Um..." Mike looked around the room before his eyes landed on the TV. "A game console. Yeah a new Atari. His broke and his mom can't afford a new one for him."

"Why don't you let Ted and I take care of that then," Karen said. "Those are pretty expensive and I don't want you to have to spend all your money on one."

"No, no," Mike said, frantically throwing his hands in the air. "Really it's fine, I just need thirty dollars."

Thirty dollars was the cost of what Mike wanted to buy his best friend. It wasn't an Atari—those cost over one hundred dollars. No, what the young Wheeler boy wanted to buy was much better, and much more meaningful. He just hoped Will would think so, too.

"Only thirty? Ataris are over one hundred." A sort of concerned look spread across Mrs. Wheeler's face. "How long have you been saving?"

"Oh, not too long," Mike said, trying to be nonchalant. "But long enough. Doing some odd jobs, too, you know. Can I just have the money.?" Then he added, "Please?"

"Alright well I'll have to go to the bank to take it out," Karen sighed. "I needed a new pair of shoes, anyway. This'll be a good excuse for me to get outside."

"I'll come with you," Mike said before she could add anything else.

"That way I don't need to make two trips, either."

"You really want to come shopping with me?" his mom raised her eyebrows at him.

"No, I can just bike home."

"Okay," Mrs. Wheeler gave in. "Go put your bike in my car while I end this phone call."

Mike nodded quickly before turning and running downstairs. He told his friends he had to go get one last thing before the party, then rushed out the back door. As soon as he was in the garage he grabbed his bike and threw open the trunk of his mother's car. Mike pushed and shoved his bike into the back before slamming the door closed and racing to get into the passenger seat.

By the time Karen Wheeler came sauntering out of the house, coat in hand, purse slung over her shoulder, Mike's panting had almost completely subsided. Not enough, apparently, because as soon as she sat down and closed the door, Karen said, "Mike you really should join a school sport or something, honey. You'll never get in shape with all the sitting around playing video games you do."

"I'm not fat, Mom," Mike said, glancing down at his hands as if they would explain what his mom was telling him.

"I know you aren't, sweetie." Karen started the car before adjusting the rear view mirror and backing out of the driveway. "But you also aren't the strongest boy around. Those arms could use a bit more muscle."

Mike's gaze tore away from his hands up to his biceps, where his striped sweater hung loosely. He grimaced in embarrassment.

The rest of the ride was mostly quite, interrupted only by Mrs. Wheeler humming occasionally.

When they arrived at the Hawkin's Bank, Mike jumped out first. He bounced on the balls of his feet impatiently as he waited for his mother to turn off the engine, grab her purse, open her door, lock the doors, and slowly step out of her seat.

"Calm down, Michael," Karen said, walking around the front of the car. "You're going to have an aneurysm."

"Come on," Mike groaned, walking in front of his mother up to the bank.

After making a withdrawal of \$50, Karen and Mike Wheeler strolled out of the bank and back to their car.

"You need thirty?" Karen asked her son as she went over to the driver's side to pop open the trunk.

"Yup," Mike nodded, pulling open the trunk door and dragging his bike out. He wheeled it over to where his mom was counting out one twenty and one ten dollar bill.

"Here you go," she said, smiling at Mike who was pocketing the money. "Be careful and go right home as soon as you're done, okay? I'll be home later."

"Okay. And the party starts at five o'clock if you change your mind about coming."

Karen pursed her lips. "I don't know, Mikey. I'm really busy tonight. But wish Will a happy birthday for me? And don't forget to thank Mrs. Byers for letting you use her house for the party."

"Okay." Mike pushed his bike past his mom. "See you later, then." He didn't wait to see his mom wave to him as he swung a long jean clad leg over the bike and pedaled off.

Upon arrival at the town jewelers, Mike stalled. He looked around to see if anyone was watching as he leaned his bike against a tree outside and walked into the little shop.

"Hello, how can I help you?" said a bored looking girl who mustn't've been more than two years older than Mike. Her eyes were trained above Mike's head. He glanced back and saw a clock above the door.

"Um, hi, you know that one ring in the window?" Mike asked nervously.

The girl made a face that clearly said, *There are about 50 rings in the window, no I don't know which one.*

"The one with the blue heart," he added.

"Oh yeah, that one."

"Okay, um, is it, by any chance, made of aquamarine?"

"Yup."

"Thought so," Mike said, more to himself. Then to the girl (who he would later recognize as Becky, one of Steve's exes), "It's only thirty dollars, right?"

"Not including tax. I don't understand why my boss doesn't up the price on those ones, they sell like wildfire every March," Becky said. Her eyes slowly trailed from the clock above the door to Mike, as though he had just walked through the door. Mike stood uncomfortably as she looked him up and down like she was inspecting him. "You getting one for your girl?" Becky asked, her eyes finally settling on Mike's and her lips turning up in a smirk.

"Yes," he said quickly, hoping it would make her stop looking at him like that. "My girlfriend. We're very serious, I really love her. A lot."

Becky nodded, her mouth suddenly a frown. "I'll go get one for you." Mike watched as she turned and walked into the back of the store, was gone a couple seconds, then walked back out to the counter with a small gray box in her hands. Mike realized he was still standing in the doorway when Becky motioned him over to the counter with her hand. He stepped up to it slowly as she punch numbers into the cash register.

"Thirty one eighty is your total," she told him, a small smile on her lips when she met his eyes. Mike fumbled in his pocket for the money his mom gave him and two ones from his allowance. Mike watched as she scribbled something on the back of the receipt before handing it to him. "Here is your ring. Twenty cents is your change, and this is for if you ever change your mind about that girl of yours." Becky handed him the change, ring (in a paper bag), and receipt with a

wink. He didn't bother smiling back at her as he shoved the change in his pocket and walked back out the door.

Once he was outside, Mike couldn't help but look at the back of the receipt, even though he knew exactly what would be there. A phone number and a heart were scrawled across the slip of paper. Mike had a strong urge to throw it away, but knew he had to keep it just in case the ring didn't work out and he had to return it.

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Will had had an amazing day. His mom and brother had woken him up at 8 am with his new favorite song *Shout* by his new favorite artist Fears for Tears.

"Happy birthday, baby!" Joyce said as soon as she saw Will's eyes open. "Get up and get dressed, we're going out to breakfast."

"Happy birthday, Will," Jonathan said, hugging Will as their mother looked on with a smile.

"We'll be waiting in the kitchen," Joyce informed a still half asleep Will, before tugging Jonathan out of the room and closing the door behind them.

Will sat up and looked around. There was a yellow smiley face balloon tied around his bedpost and a small gift wrapped with blue paper on his bed under that. He crawled to the end of his bed, a bright smile growing on his face. Will picked up the package and immediately knew what it was. He noticed a piece of paper taped to the package and carefully lifted it so he could read what it said.

Hey, buddy. Sorry it's been so long since I've made you one of these. I haven't seen you much lately because of college. I made this in the time since I saw you over Christmas, picking and pulling some I thought you'd like. Happy birthday! -J

Smiling even wider, Will tore the paper off the cassette. It was labeled "15". Deciding on listening to it later, he jumped off his bed, put his new cassette on his desk, and pulled the outfit he'd made up for today out of his closet. He didn't usually come up with his outfits

the day before (he was usually just too lazy), but today he wanted to look nice.

After quickly getting ready, Will headed out into the kitchen where Jonathan was sitting waiting.

"Ready to go?" Jonathan asked, standing up.

Will looked around, concerned. "Yeah, sure. Where's Mom?"

"Just starting the car," Jonathan said. "It's cold out and she wanted to warm it up for you."

Will's mind went back two years and thought of how, at one point, he wouldn't have liked it warmed up. He shuddered at the random flashback and replaced the wretched look on his face with a smile.

Jonathan offered a consoling grin. "We should go before Mom freezes to death out there."

"That wouldn't be good," Will said, grimacing. He slipped on a coat as Jonathan lead him out the door and into the cool March air.

Full from an amazing breakfast at what used to be Benny's Burgers (now a diner under a different name) Joyce brought her sons to the new bookstore in town to have a look around. She told them they could each get one small thing, gave Jonathan some money then told him to take Will to the arcade when they were done at the bookstore. ("Aren't you coming with us?" Will had asked his mom through the open car window.) From the driver's seat Joyce had explained that she needed to do a few errands, but would meet them at the arcade later.

Which was why Joyce was pulling up to the Wheeler's house just as Mike Wheeler himself was riding in on his bike. He smiled and raised a hand when he saw her.

"What's that?" Joyce asked when she saw the brown paper bag clutched in the hand Mike had just greeted her with. She got out of her car which was now parked on the side of the road in front of the mailbox. Mike hopped off his bike and quickly folded the bag up until it was in the shape of a small cube.

"Oh, nothing," he said, stashing the now cubed bag into his pocket. "Do you want to come in?"

"Yeah, thanks," Joyce said, shaking off her strange suspicion. (*What is that boy hiding?*) "I just came to check on how everything is coming along."

Mike gave her a side grin and gestured for her to follow him as he started up to the front door.

"My mom's out right now, but Steve and Nancy should still be here," Mike informed Joyce as he pushed a key into the lock on the door. "Everyone else is in the basement."

"Okay," Joyce said, smiling. "I think I'll just check in with your sister really quickly then."

"Why aren't you with Will?" Mike asked suddenly, turning around halfway through the open door.

"I just wanted to check in here while Will and Jonathan are at the arcade."

"Oh, okay," Mike said. He seemed like he wanted to say something else, but he just shook his head and walked away.

Joyce frowned in the direction the boy had disappeared. He hadn't told her *where* Steve and Nancy were. She stepped farther into the house and heard voices coming from her left. Joyce walked in that direction and was met by the sweet smell of cake. Following the smell, she finds Steve and Nancy in the kitchen by the oven. Nancy was the first to spot her.

"Mrs. Byers!" Nancy exclaimed with a confused smile. "I thought you were taking Will out today."

"Oh, the boys are at the arcade," Joyce said. "And Nancy, please call me Joyce."

"Of course." Nancy turned around and picked up a white, round cake stand from the counter. On it was a light green cake with *Happy Birthday Will!* written on the top. "Like it?"

"That's amazing," Joyce said, looking at the cake. "He is going to love this."

Nancy nodded. "Glad you like it."

"So how're the decorations going?" Joyce asked, looking over at Steve this time, who had been leaning against the counter since she came in.

Steve shrugged. "You'll have to go check with the losers downstairs on that one."

"Steve!" Nancy scoffed at him. "The younger ones are working on decorations in the basement."

"Thank you, see you at the party." Joyce walked over to the door by the other side of the kitchen. As soon as she opened the door, she could hear bickering. She descended the stairs quickly, stopping at the bottom to take in the mess. There was construction paper and streamers everywhere.

"How's everything coming?" Joyce asked, just noticing the two girls on the couch, El's head resting on Max's shoulder as she flipped through an X-Men comic.

"It's coming along alright," Lucas said. "We're almost ready to set up. Is that okay?"

"Yup," Joyce nodded. "You know where the extra key is?"

"Yes we do, Mrs. Byers. Thanks so much," Dustin said.

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At the arcade Will was watching Jonathan smash his hand against a *Ghosts n' Goblins* machine. There was something weighing heavily on his mind and he needed to tell Jonathon or he would explode into a billion pieces.

"Hey, Jonathan?" Will said timidly.

"Yeah?" Jonathan said, not really hearing Will with how into the

game he was.

Just as Will was about to say something, Troy and James walked by. "Hey fairy. I see you're here with your mom."

Jonathan looked over at them, completely forgetting his game. Will just rolled his eyes.

"What'd you say to him?" Jonathan asked Troy.

"I said you're both psychos."

"Come on, Jonathan," Will whispered, tugging on his brother's arm.

"That's right, *Jonathan*," Troy said, mimicking Will in a high-pitched voice.

Will saw Jonathon start to tense up. "Seriously, just ignore him."

"Does this happen a lot?" Jonathan asked, directing it to Will, but not bringing his eyes off Troy.

"The little fag deserves much worse than this," Troy sneered. "Queers like him shouldn't be able to get away with that gay shit."

Jonathan looked ready to slam Troy's head into the side of the nearest arcade game, but Will couldn't let him get into trouble on his birthday. So he grabbed Jonathan's wrist and pulled as hard as he could. Jonathan, surprisingly, gave and allowed himself to be pulled away from the bullies.

"I don't care if my brother is gay, it's assholes like you who shouldn't get away with this shit!"

Once they were safely in the back of the arcade, away from all the people, Will turned Jonathan around and looked him in the eye. "Stop."

"No, Will," Jonathan said, pulling his arm out of the younger boy's grasp. "You can't let them treat you like that. Does that happen a lot?"

"No," Will lied, averting his eyes to escape Jonathan's withering stare.

"But I don't care."

"Good, because you shouldn't," Jonathan sighed. "Don't listen to what they say. They're just being mean. They can't tell you who you are."

"Well, they're not wrong," Will said, a nervous chuckle slipping from his lips. He looked up at Jonathan expectantly, but he was looking back over his shoulder, a glare on his face. "Jonathan!"

"Huh?" Jonathan turned to face Will again. "Sorry I missed that."

"Of course you did," Will mumbled, before saying a bit louder, "I said they're not wrong. About me." There was a length of silence. The brothers were both looking anywhere but into the eyes of the other. "I'm...gay."

"Oh," Jonathan said. "Cool. I mean, yeah I guess I knew that. Cool. Thanks for telling me." Jonathan pulled his little brother into a hug. When he let go, they were both smiling. "Come on. I need to go finish my game."

As they walked back to the machine Jonathan had been playing on, Will's mind couldn't help but wander. The Party all knew he was gay. He'd never told them outright, but they definitely knew. They just didn't talk about it. It was pretty awkward talking about that, especially around Mike.

Will had had a crush on Mike since before he knew what a crush was. He didn't know when it started. Maybe it was the first day on the swingset. Maybe it was when they would get together to watch movies or play, just the two of them. But he'd realized it two years ago in the midst of his string of near-death experiences. And he hadn't been able to get Mike out of his mind since.

All day he'd been itching to know what Mike was up to. He hadn't gotten a call from any of his friends over his radio this morning, and he wondered if they had forgotten his birthday. But he knew Mike would never forget his birthday, and he wished he had brought his radio with him to see if Mike would say anything. Will had told the Party that he was going to be out all day today, anyway. Maybe he woke up too late and missed them.

"Will?" He felt his brother's hand touch his shoulder. "You okay?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm fine," Will reassured him, smiling to prove it. "Just thinking."

"Mom's waiting for us. Ready to go home?"

"Yeah," Will nodded, starting towards the front doors of the arcade.

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The Party minus Will hurried to get everything together before the Byers' got home. Steve had driven Dustin, Lucas, and Max along with the necessary decorations. Nancy had been in charge of driving her little brother, Eleven, the presents, Will's favorite snacks, and (most importantly) the cake. Which was held tight by El the entire way there. She was very invested in making sure that cake stayed perfect.

Once there, Nancy put together all of the food stuffs with Lucas's help, Eleven and Max set up a present table, and Dustin and Steve put up the decorations. Mike was supposed to be helping with decorations, but instead he was running around, telling people what to do and how to do it.

Chief Jim Hopper showed up just in time to add the finishing touches on the house and blow up some balloons.

After everything had been set up, they all gathered around the window to watch for Joyce's car. They were sitting there in silence for a long time before they started to hear the muffled engine. When the old green car pulled into view, they all flew off the couch and ran for the closest hiding spot. The seven of them crouched behind various pieces of furniture as they listened for the sound of the car doors slamming shut. The entire room seemed to hold its breath as the door knob on the front door rattled.

"It's unlocked," Will Byers, birthday boy extraordinaire, started to say. "Did you know it was unlocked?"

Will lifted his head up to see the state of the living room just as everyone jumped out of their hiding places. Half of the room shouted "Happy Birthday!" while the other half shouted "Surprise!" The end

result was a jumble of sounds and noises mixed together and a huge smile on Will's face.

"We should have rehearsed that," Mike grumbled under his breath. One by one they all went up to give Will a hug or pat on the back. Mike was at the end and he smiled lightly as he embraced his best friend.

"Happy birthday, Will," Mike whispered in his ear, his lips brushing against it. Mike blushed when he felt Will shudder. Mike pulled away and dragged Will over towards the food by his hand.

There was pizza, pretzels, cookies, and chips. Will couldn't help but notice that Mike hadn't let go of his hand. Mike stopped pulling when they had reached their friends who were standing in a small group by the snack table.

They all looked at each other until Max broke the silence with, "Let's get this party started!"

Eleven and Max got up and went into the middle of the room to dance. Jonathan walks over to where the cassette player was sitting and pressed play. Immediately one of Will's favorite songs flooded the room with music. Dustin, Lucas, Mike, and Will went together to join the group coagulating in the middle of the living room where Steve and Hopper had pushed back the coffee and chair to give room for dancing.

After about an hour of dancing, snacking, and happy birthday wishing, Joyce announced it was time for cake. The lights were turned off and people were seated around the room on miscellaneous chairs, with Mike, Jonathan, Nancy, and of course Will sitting at the table. An unsteady chorus of voices belted the lyrics of the birthday song while Joyce walked the candle ridden cake over to where the now-15-year-old boy was sitting. Jonathan snapped a couple pictures as Will blew out the candle with a grin and everyone around the room clapped.

"Come and get it!" Joyce called, grabbing a knife to slice the cake. She dished out the cake to people as they came over, cutting herself a piece last.

She and Hopper sat together eating their cake as Will watched on. He liked Hopper, and knew his mom did too. They'd been spending a lot of time together lately, and Joyce had been looking happier because of it. Will brought his attention back to the three others he was sitting with. Jonathan and Nancy were deep in conversation. When Will looked at the boy sitting next to him, he realized that Mike had already been staring at him. He smiled at the taller boy and nudged his arm. Mike smiled back, his ears turning red. Will felt something hit his foot and knew without looking that Mike kicked him. Will made a face of silent shock and kicked Mike back with a giggle.

They'd been like this for a long time, and everyone had already noticed. Constantly touching whenever they could. Sharing looks like conversations that no one else could understand. Staying close to each other at every opportunity. It was just a matter of when they would admit it to themselves. They had something special.

"Hey!" Dustin shouted from across the room. "When are you gonna open presents?"

"Yeah," Max agreed, nodding enthusiastically. She started chanting, "Presents, presents, presents!"

"Alright!" Will gave in, beaming at his friends. He stood up, but was promptly stopped by his mother who informed him that birthday boys should not be made to retrieve their own presents.

Will was greatly pleased and grateful for every present he received, thanking and double thanking each person who gave him something. When he opened the wooden box full of art supplies that Mike got him, he hugged the other boy. It was a nice feeling, being in Mike's long arms. Maybe he enjoyed it a bit too much. Maybe he stayed like that for a bit too long. Maybe he sniffed Mike's hair and maybe that was weird but his cologne smelled really nice and maybe Will wanted to drown in that scent.

After a few hours, people started to leave and the party fun was cleaned up. The food was packed away and Hopper pushed the coffee table back to the center of the room. Eleven hugged Will and Jim wished him a happy birthday one more time before walking out the front door with El in tow and driving off. Mike and Nancy were the

last ones to leave. Nancy thanked Joyce, with Joyce returning the thanks just as copiously.

Mike turned to Will one more time before he left. He leaned in so that no one else could hear him besides Will and whispered, "Leave your window unlocked."

It wouldn't be the first time Mike had snuck into Will's room in the middle of the night, but this time it might actually mean something. Will felt heat creep up his neck and saw a similar blush invading Mike's own face. This only made him blush harder. He nodded and smirked.

"Come on, numskull." Nancy's voice broke through the bubble that had momentarily separated the two young boys from the rest of the world. Mike flashed Will one more smile before following his sister out into the night.

Will sighed, watching him go. Then he turned and sprinted to his room shouting over his shoulder, "I'm tired! Goodnight!" Will could practically hear his mother shaking her head in confusion.

As soon as he was in his room with the door shut, Will unlocked the window and pushed it up a couple inches, just enough to stick his hand through but not enough to be noticeable by Joyce. He searched frantically through his drawers to find pajamas that weren't riddled with holes or covered in stains. He settled on an old New Order t-shirt and a loosely fitting pair of blue plaid pants.

Will walked into the bathroom and closed the door. He looked at himself in the mirror, scrutinizing his reflection. The clothing hung off his thin frame in a way that almost made him look emaciated. He tried straightening his back and puffing out his chest. It helped a bit. Will's hair was fine this morning but by now it was clumping together on his forehead. He grabbed a comb from the edge of the sink and ran it through, separating the brown strands. He frowned for good measure and reached for his toothbrush.

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Mike's leg did not stop bouncing the entire way home. He couldn't

wait to get back to Will.

"What is your problem?" Nancy asked him, genuinely curious.

"What?"

"Your leg." Nancy took a hand off the steering wheel to motion at Mike's antsy leg. "Why is it doing that?"

"I don't know." Mike blushed and turned his head towards the window.

"What's going on, Mike?" Nancy had an idea about her brother and Will. She had never heard it outright from either of them, but Jonathan and Steve thought the same thing. She'd just never seen Mike this worried after spending time with Will. Usually he was beaming and wouldn't shut up. Now he was completely quiet, chewing on his lower lip. She wondered if something bad had happened at the party. So she asked. "Did something happen? Between you and Will?"

"What?" Mike suddenly looked terrified. "What do you mean? Of course nothing happened. What would happen? We're friends!"

"Okay, Mike." Nancy shook her head. His outburst was strange, that's for sure. So was the way he was acting. She decided that whatever it was, Mike obviously didn't want to talk about it, and if he did he would. Nancy didn't push it.

As soon as Nancy pulled into the Wheeler's garage—even before she turned off the engine—Mike was out of the car and through the door. He rushed up stairs to where his parents were sitting in the living room, staring blankly at the TV, Karen with a glass of white wine in her hands.

"Hey, guys," Mike breathed.

"Hi, sweetie, how was the party?" Karen asked, her face coming to life with the arrival of her son.

"It was good, yeah," Mike told her, nodding solemnly. "Um, I'm really tired from the super long of party planning and everything, so I think

I'll just go upstairs and go to sleep."

"Okay, well I think I'll be getting to sleep soon, too." Karen stood up and stretched. "Go do what you need to do and I'll be up to say goodnight. Oh, and Holly's already asleep so make sure to be really quiet."

Mike nodded again and tried not to run up the stairs too quickly. He hurried into the bathroom to brush his teeth before going back to Will's. Not that he might need his mouth to taste good, he just wanted to feel clean.

He heard his mother ascending the stairs just as he was drying his hands on the hand towel next to the sink. He switched off the lights and bolted into his bed, pulling the covers up high enough to hide his clothes. He shut his eyes lightly, trying his hardest to look asleep.

Mike's lungs were aching with an effort to keep his breathing steady as he listened to Karen walk to his bed. He lay as still as possible, but almost jumped when she placed a hand on his forehead. She sighed, then retracted her hand. He heard her make her way back to the door and close it.

As soon as she was gone, Mike threw off his blanket. He jumped up and went over to his dresser and rummaged through his sock drawer. His face lit up in an *Aha!* when his hand hit the small cube. He grabbed it and closed the drawer.

Mike waited one, two, three heartbeats before he slowly pulled the door open. He looked to either side, then tiptoed over to his sister's door, making sure to close his own, first. He listened for movement inside, and when he heard none, he opened it just enough to see in. He breathed a sigh of relief because Nancy wasn't in her room. Mike quickly and quietly pushed the door open, slipped in, and shut it. He walked over to the window, his heart beating in his throat. He pushed it open, listened, then started climbing out. Once he was out he pushed it shut again.

Mike sat there on the roof, breathing heavily, waiting for his heart to make its way back to his chest. He didn't like sneaking out from Nancy's room, because there was such an increased risk of getting

caught, but climbing out of his own window was so much harder. He was about to make his way off the roof when he saw Nancy's door open and light streak across the previously dark room. Mike dropped to his stomach on the cold shingles as Nancy walked in and flicked on the light switch. He tried his best to shimmy down the decline as Nancy pulled off her jacket and started walking towards the window. Mike couldn't breathe. As much as he wanted to, he couldn't close his eyes, either. Most of his body was hidden, but because of the way the roof was angled, his face and the tops of his shoulders were in full view of the window.

Nancy stopped walking when she reached the other side of the room. She was looking right at the window, right at Mike. He was looking back at her. She opened her mouth, but then shut it again. She looked over her shoulder at the door, then turned back to Mike, her lips pursed. She reached out in front of her and picked a book up off the bench in front of the window. Then she walked to her bed and sat with her back to the window. It was like she didn't see him. But she did, didn't she? Was she letting him go? Would she tell Karen and Ted once she knew Mike was gone?

These weren't things Mike had time to ponder on. He needed to get off that roof and to Will's house as soon as possible. He had things to do. But he didn't go right away. He sat up and stared at his sister. He watched as she turned her body to look at him. Her eyes connected with his and she raised her eyebrows as if to say *Go!* He smiled at her gratefully, and she smiled back.

Mike slid off the roof and onto the mulch below, stumbling as he landed.

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Will had almost fallen asleep when he heard tapping on his window. He sat up in bed as Mike slid his fingers under the pane and pushed up. Will quickly jumped out of bed and pulled the blankets back up to cover where he had just been laying. He watched awkwardly as his friend struggled to get his gangly limbs through the open window. Once he was all in, Mike smiled at Will. Will smiled back.

"What's this about?" Will asked. It wasn't making him upset that his

best friend wanted to see him, but there was usually a reason. Like a new comic came out and they wanted to read it together, or Mike borrowed an R rated film from Nancy and they wanted to watch it but weren't allowed.

Mike was glad there was only moonlight to illuminate the room because he was blushing hard. "Um, well, you see," Mike started. He now wondered if this was a bad idea. What if Will thought the ring was too girly and hated it? What if, all along, Mike had been imagining Will's blush when he got too close? What if Will actually hated every time Mike brushed up against him for no reason whatsoever?

"Mike?" Will whispered. "What is it? Is something wrong? What happened?"

Mike almost laughed. "Nothing happened." He took a deep breath. "I actually just forgot to give you a birthday present. That's all."

Mike could see Will's shoulders relaxing, and could feel the small breath of relief he let out. "Good."

Mike pulled the ring out of his jacket pocket and handed it to Will. He watched as Will unwrapped the brown paper bag that it was still in and pulled out the small gray box.

Will's eyes flicked up to Mike's and then back to the box. Up to Mike's again. "Well?" Mike said. "Open it."

Will nodded, gulped, and carefully pushed the lid up. All air left his lungs when he saw the ring inside. Even in the dim moonlight it shone brilliantly! "Is that—"

"Aquamarine?"

"My birthstone."

Mike nodded, his hands clasped tightly together in front of him.

"Mike, this is amazing! Where did you find it? Oh no, was it expensive? It must've been expensive. And you got me that amazing art set. Mike I really don't think you should've—"

Mike cut Will off again, but this time it wasn't with a word. It was with a kiss. Mike pulled back as soon as his lips touched Will's, not wanting to be too much if it wasn't what Will wanted. Will's jaw dropped as Mike's face retreated.

Mike cleared his throat and stared at the other boy. "Hey, Mike?" Will asked.

"Yeah?"

"Can I kiss you?"

Mike nodded vigorously. Will stepped forward until he could almost hear the other boy's heartbeat. Then he stood on his tippy toes and reached up to press his mouth against Mike's. Mike assisted by bending his neck down to meet Will. Will gently pulled away after a little while. Up close he could see every freckle on Mike's cheeks. He could taste Mike's lips even after they left. Like mint and something else. Something so purely *Mike*.

Mike closed the distance again. It was strange how good a simple act like touching lips could make Will feel. He never wanted Mike's lips to leave his own. Will wanted to hold onto Mike for as long as he could. Mike was his now. Will pulled back again, wanting to see Mike's eyes. He smiled when he did. He'd always loved Mike's eyes.

The raven-haired boy took Will's face in his hands and slowly touched his lips to Will's. His lips were trembling. Mike pushed his fingers into the smaller one's hair and slotted his chin to deepen the kiss. Will kissed him back and it felt like they both had been waiting for decades to be with the other. They wouldn't let go now. They were each other's safe place.

"You want to sit down?" Mike muttered against Will's lips. Will nodded. He and Mike sat down on Will's bed next to each other.

Mike took a deep breath before turning his head and placing a kiss on Will's neck right below his ear. He smirked when he heard Will's breath hitch. Will brought his head down to meet Mike's. Their mouths moved together like a dance neither of them knew they knew how to do. Mike took a bold move and swiped his tongue out against

Will's lips. Before Will could react, a loud noise came from outside. The two boys jumped apart so quickly it was like they were electrocuted.

"What was that?" Mike whispered.

Will shook his head, looking at the door. "I don't know. Probably just my mom falling out of bed or something."

Mike sighed. "I should probably go before she comes in here and finds me."

Will frowned. "Yeah, I guess so. She comes in to check on me a lot since...you know."

Mike nodded. He slowly stood up and walked towards the open window. "See you on Monday, then."

Will raised a hand to wave, and in doing so realized he was still holding the box with the ring in it. He watched the older boy climb back out the window and stumble into the dark. Then he looked down at the ring. Will slipped the ring out of its foam holder and tried it on. It fit perfectly on the little finger of his right hand. He smiled at the little blue heart.

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Mike ran to where he left his bike in the woods, jumping every now and then and pumping his fists in the air. Adrenaline was coursing through his veins and he was very close to shouting.

When he reached his bike he was out of breath. Even if he did have breath left he would've lost it once he came across this: instead of on the ground, where he'd left it, his bike was in the clutches of the Chief of Hawkins Police.

"Oh shit," he mumbled. Then to Jim Hopper, "Hey, Chief. What're you doing here?"

Mike's first idea was that Nancy told their parents that Mike snuck out and their parents called the police.

"It doesn't matter what I'm doing here," Hopper said. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Did my parents call you?"

"Should they have? Do they know you snuck out?"

"No, but Nancy does," Mike said with a grimace. "So if my parents didn't call you, why are you here?"

"Get in the car," Hopper grumbled, turning away from Mike and opening up the trunk of his large police car. "I'm taking you home."

Mike hesitantly got in the car as Hopper started it up, the engine roaring to life. They sat in awkward silence for a while before Jim spoke up. "Where you and Will at least safe?"

"Oh my god," Mike groaned, dropping his head in his hands. "What do you think we were doing?"

"I'm just drawing conclusions here, kid." Hopper shook his head. "You sneaking around in the middle of the night. Did you get in through Will's window?"

"Yeah." Mike lifted his head. "How'd you know that?"

"I'm a cop I'm good at deductive reasoning," Hop said, a little too quickly.

"You were in the house, too. Weren't you?" Mike's face was turning horror struck as he realized why Hopper had been in the woods the same time Mike had. And what that noise coming from Joyce's room could've been.

"This isn't time for the kid to question the adult. Just tell me you were safe. I don't want either of you getting AIDS."

"Oh my god!" Mike repeated. "Stop! We didn't do anything!"

Mike huffed out a breath. He wondered whether he should tell Will about this. He told Will everything and he'd probably need to tell someone, but he didn't know if Will would want to hear about his

mom and Hopper.

"You can drop me off here," Mike said to Hopper once his road was in sight. "I don't want my parents to see the cop car if they're still awake."

"Okay, kid, goodnight," Hopper said, unlocking the doors. Mike retrieved his bike from the trunk and kicked off as Jim drove his van away.

Mike closed his eyes as he pedaled, letting the cold air seep into his skin and run through his hair. He felt new. Like he could do anything. And he'd just done everything he ever wanted to do.

Mike got home too fast. He stowed away his bike outside the garage door, since it had already been closed. He didn't want to have to go in through Nancy's room, but because the garage would make too much noise to open and the front door was always locked, Mike didn't have a choice.

He marched around to the front of the house and hoisted himself onto the roof. He hoped Nancy's window wasn't locked, too. Thankfully, it wasn't. He slid it up just enough to climb into, then turned around and pushed it back down. He shuffled across the dark room.

Nancy spoke up just as Mike was about to open her door. "Did Will have a nice birthday?"

Mike smiled in the dark. "Yeah, I think he did."